

Oconee talks potential costs of school consolidation

Officials: New elementary school could cost \$35M

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WALHALLA — Parents and community members have repeatedly voiced their opposition to a potential

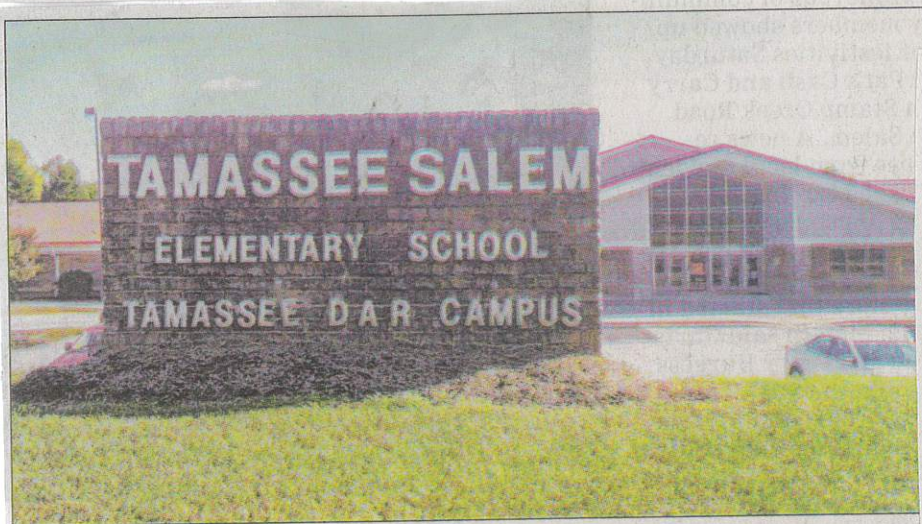
elementary school consolidation during School District of Oconee County meetings since the idea was first introduced this summer.

The district presented its long-range building plan at

the board's annual retreat in June, which involves two different five-phase plan options. Both include a proposed new elementary school

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"We don't lay people off. We use attrition to place people somewhere else (in the district)," he explained. "What that would mean was that would be potentially six less teachers (human



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Community members have voiced opposition to a potential elementary school consolidation during School District of Oconee County meetings.

to combine Keowee and Tamassee-Salem elementary schools, an approximately \$35 million project estimated to be finished in 2029. Part of the decision to consolidate was for cost savings.

Residents of Tamassee and Salem have shown up in droves to speak at meetings to provide representation in the audience. On multiple occasions, speakers have pointed to the district's decision to close Tamassee-Salem High School in 2016, also for cost savings, which they claimed the district never realized.

Associate superintendent of administration Steve Hanvey presented a cost comparison at Monday's board meeting to break down the \$1.35 million the district would save in personnel costs

with the consolidation. The calculations didn't include district savings from utilities, maintenance and transportation.

"These (calculations) are based on this year's numbers. In the plan, the earliest it looks like if it were to happen would be 2029-ish before the school would be able to be done," he said. "I can't tell you what it's going to be in five or six years, but I will tell you it's probably not going down. The number will go up."

Hanvey also addressed a question about cutting employees. Custodial, clerical and teacher assistant positions were all reduced, and all other positions dropped from two to one. The number of teachers would drop from 33 to 27.

resources director) Mr. (Al) LeRoy would be hunting for, because we would have those to place."

NO 'ANIMOSITY'

Superintendent Michael Thorsland addressed two topics in one fell swoop: that the school would unnecessarily buy up land and waste resources, and comments about wanting to keep school size and class sizes small.



Thorsland

"Decisions do have to be made sometimes to provide more consistent service," he said. "It's not because of any animosity to any community in our county, it's just over time as transportation has improved, it is easier and more efficient for us to provide services in buildings that serve larger numbers of students."

"For us to have elementary schools that served 200 students — if we did that for

the entire county, we'd have to have 22 or 23 elementary schools. Talk about taking up additional space," he continued. "If we wanted to provide that kind of service to every elementary family in our county, we'd be adding schools. And we don't feel like that's the most efficient use of resources."

Hanvey chimed in that having more students in a school can create opportunities for more schoolwide projects, clubs, course programs and better gifted and talented instruction.

WHAT ABOUT THE MONEY?

Hanvey went to bat against claims the district could be using the money allotted for the new school for other things. He said some funding is designated for specific projects.

"We have certain funds that have to be spent on capital projects, we call it 8 percent money," he said. "There's a limit on how much we can get as far as selling bonds and being